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International Jewish Writing: From the Bellagio Conference

CYNTHIA OZICK

Prayer Leader

I SHOULD LIKE TO ARRIVE AT some general propositions about translating poetry. There are three points to remember about these propositions: first, they are important; second, they are useful; and third, they are false.

It is their falseness I should wish to consider above all. Everyone knows the legend of how the Septuagint—the oldest Greek version of Hebrew Scripture—came to be written: seventy sages, we are told, entered seventy separate chambers, and emerged with seventy copies of an identical text.

This is of course a false tale: but its falseness teaches us something significant about how to look at a translated text. If a translation seems flawless, we take it to be authoritative; if it is authoritative, we trust its importance; if we can trust its importance, we know it will be useful. And by "useful" I mean that a translation can serve as a lens into the underground life of another culture.

The false story about the seventy copies of a single text is a useful comment on a fundamental Jewish insight: the Unity of the Creator, the singularity of the Voice of the Lord of History.

Translating someone's little *lider*, you might object, is not the same as translating Scripture, and does not require so grandiose a metaphor.

Now I *could* make the case that Yiddish poetry often has a liturgical impulse despite itself, and that Yiddish poetry is after all a "continuation" of Scripture, or at least a continuation of the resonances of Scripture; but I won't make that case. Not because there are so many exceptions, but because there is a more interesting case to be made about translation.

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And that case is this: that translation is possible. I might note that Irving Howe disagrees. "It is neither more nor less difficult to translate a Yiddish idiom than a French idiom," he writes: "both are virtually impossible." That is a point of view from which it is vital to demur. Translation is not only possible, but inescapable. By "translation" I mean of course good translation, exact translation, superb translation: the entire carrying-over from one language to another, from one culture to another.

Everyone recalls that Robert Frost famously defined a poem as that which "disappears in translation." A skeptical witticism by an unbeliever. But a translator may not be a skeptic, he may not be a wit at the expense of his calling, and certainly he must not be an unbeliever. A translator must be one of the seventy sages.

In order to make translation possible, the translator must believe in certain impossible theses. These are, as I have said, important, useful, and false.

The first false idea is the most indispensable. It is simply that the poem is not "translated," but uncovered. The seventy sages were able to go into seventy different rooms and come out with a single text because that single text was already *there*. It had only to be found.

In the same way, just as the poem already exists, so does the right, faithful, and true translation already exist, needing only to be uncovered. The translated poem is inherent in the new language. It must be hewn out of the new language as a figure locked in the recalcitrant rock is hewn out and revealed.

This commanding proposition, which is both Platonic and false, is also important and useful.

It is important because without this belief a translation could never be seen as a thing achieved, concluded, finished; it would be regarded as merely a try in a series of tries, as an approach, an attempt, an approximation, a probability, a "version" selected out of a myriad of other versions.

But when we read the poem in translation, we want to feel we are reading the poem itself. We do not want to feel suspicious or unsure. We want to hand ourselves over to the *given*-ness of the poem, and to rest in the authority of its being.

Another way of putting this is to say that a translation must be complete, and must be felt to be complete.

A translation that is tentative or "interim" is useless to the reader. For the translator it is like sewing with a thread that has no knot. *Vi ken a shnayder neyen on a knipl?*

There is another purpose in believing in the false proposition that a translation of a poem pre-exists. It has to do with the translator's view of himself: is he the poem's tenant or its landlord? If he is the poem's

tenant, he is obligated to the poem. If he is the poem's landlord, the poem is obligated to him for its sustenance. Now at this point one must stop and think sympathetically of the poet, the maker of the original poem in its original language. Does he want to share ownership of the poem with the translator? When we read some of the Russian emigrant writers, Joseph Brodsky, for instance, commenting nastily on the inadequacies of their translators, we can see that often enough the poet demands translation not to be independently equivalent or parallel, but subordinate and slavish.

But the relation of the poem to its translation is not that of an object to its shadow, nor even that of an object to its reflection in a mirror. What that relation really is, I will define in a moment.

To understand the relation of the translator to the poem, one must understand the relation of the translator to the original poet.

Now if the notion that the poem-in-translation pre-exists and must be uncovered is my first false but necessary proposition, my second false but necessary proposition is this: *Craft becomes becoming.* By this I mean that the translator feels himself to be the poet himself, reborn into another language. Though the thesis is magical, the process is not: it is gradual. First the translator begins, bit by bit, to discover the poet's mind and especially his verbal and ideational habits; then, little by little, he acquires the poet's obsessions. Next he is able to take into himself the ruling obsession of each single poem. Next he is certain he *inhabits* the poet, walking up and down inside the maze of the poet's convictions, conditions, tics and itches. And then at last he knows he has become the poet. Not that he has "merged" with the poet; but he has become him.

As with the translator, so with the translation. The poem's translation is not the poem's shadow or reflection. The poem and its translation are two separate artifacts, each equal to the other; and not only "equal" in the sense of being "alike," but each having become the other.

We should be able to put two poems before a reader, the original and its translation, and say, "Here are two poems. They are the same poem. Which was translated from the other?" A better question would be: "Which was written first?"—As if the poem pre-existed not only in translation for the translator, but in conception for the poet; and as if both the poet and the translator had transcribed from the same source, one in one language, the other in another language.

The only justification for translation is the promise that when you hear the poem in translation, you hear the poem itself.

Perhaps it would be helpful if I paused here to summarize my three false propositions, if only to show even more emphatically how false they really are:

First, that the poem in translation is already there, hidden in the language of translation, waiting to be let out, an imperative, imminent,

immanent, immutable form ready for release, and, when released, instantly recognizable as both primary and authentic.

Second, that the translator, in becoming the poet, assumes all the authority of the poet over the poem.

Third, that the translation of the poem *is* the poem, as much as the poem itself.

Now here is a summary of the ways in which these falsehoods are important and useful for the translator:

One. If you do not believe the poem-in-translation is already there, you will never find it.

Two. If you do not believe that you have full authority over the poem, its form and its meaning, you will have no authority over it.

Three. If you do not believe you can achieve the poem itself, you will be in possession only of a fuzzy shadow and a cracked mirror.

Now you will protest that all these falsehoods and their fine corollaries are only an apparatus to give courage to the faint-hearted translator; and I agree; and the moment I agree, my apparatus collapses, and I am left cowering before the poet and the poem.

I am left cowering especially before the Yiddish poem. Most of the time it is no more difficult to translate from Yiddish into English than from French into German; but those times when it *is* more difficult, it is so much more difficult that the translator despairs. French to German, or German to Italian, or Italian to Russian, brings with it a consistency of theology, hence of culture, hence of role and artifact. But Yiddish to English means a crossing-over from Jewish concepts to Christian concepts, or at best to a secularized sensibility. And whereas prose, whether essay or fiction, can give us a glossary or footnotes, an explanatory parenthesis or an extended paraphrase, the poem is relentless in demanding an equivalent word or phrase, compacted within the compass of three syllables or half a line.

What good *then* are Ideal Passions about the Power of the Pre-Existent Poem?

A translator at work is embrangled—a word derived from *brawl* and *wrangle*—in a thousand questions of diction, gait, suggestion as opposed to transcription of meter and line-length, tonal renderings, fidelity versus sacrifice, transmutation of form; head-cracking marvels and experiments of craft.

What use *then* are Ideal Passions about the Power of the Pre-Existent Poem?

I have found in an old box in the attic a great helter-skelter heap of papers. In sorting them out, I came upon twenty-two sheets relating to a single line of a single poem. These twenty-two pages are the ones that turned up; for all I know, there may have been many more.

The line was the first line, and also the title, of a poem by Dovid Einhorn: *geshtorbn der letster bal-tfile*. The Einhorn poem was among the earliest in the various groups of poems I translated, and I came to it as a novice. One of my many errors at that time was to see the translator as a being in thrall to the editor. If the editor made a suggestion, I took it as an irreversible demand. But meanwhile, behind the scenes, I developed a kind of translator's cunning. It wasn't the cunning of brains; I couldn't outwit the editor, who was smarter than I was. But I could out-cry him. So, in letter after letter, I raised clamorous laments, I pleaded, I implored, I whined and I wheedled. And as I wheedled the editor toward what I conceived to be the poem's needs, I discovered at last that the poem *had* needs and could make unreasonable demands: the mistaken assumption that now, instead of the translator's being in thrall to the editor, English ought to be in thrall to the poem. Or, in other words, that a pretty good, workable English equivalent had to be found, rather than an exact moral equivalent.

Very gradually, through a series of feverish letters, the line evolved—from the editor's suggested line, to the poem's "English equivalent" line, to that stage where the translator was ready to assume moral authority over the poem. In the final stage the translated line became, not a line of a translated poem, but the line of a *poem*.

The poem contained the word "Shekhina," which presented no difficulty to the English reader. It is a word both in the English dictionary and in the vocabulary of Western philosophy. But the difficulty lay in the term *bal-tfile*. For *bal-tfile* the editor suggested "prayer leader."

I dispatched the following moan:

> If it has to be Prayer Leader, it has to be Prayer Leader. Only this: my spirit drops at the thought of that thin phrase. I have been trying all week with real desperation to get at some *oblique* way of suggesting the title without using the title—as *shul* became "the house of the Jews." The chief trouble with Prayer Leader is that it isn't poetry. I've tried it on the line and it looks grotesque: "The last Prayer Leader is dead." It trivializes an awesome idea. It lacks even the smallest smell of Jewishness. It's *empty*-sounding. To one who knows nothing, it illuminates nothing; to one who knows everything, it points to nothing—what Yiddishist, let alone *shul yid*, is going to guess *bal-tfile* from Prayer Leader? Isn't this a case of "correct" translation resulting in falseness, in violation? "The last Prayer Leader is dead" sounds to me exactly as fake, as flat, and as silly as an equally data-ridden term would sound, e.g., "The last underpaid secondary cantor is dead." It moves the poem out of majesty and into personnel. But for the moment I can offer only wails, no solutions.

That was written in April. In August, I find another letter still embroiled in *Geshtorbn der letster bal-tfile*. Apparently I had just discarded the phrase "singer in the pulpit."

"Singer in the pulpit [I wrote]," though metrically nice (which is why it lured me), wears churchly robes, and is not *bal-tfile*. "Singer before the Ark" came next—at least it has a Jewish whiff—but the *bal-tfile* is not usually much of a singer, and used in the line it has too many accented syllables anyhow. "Reader of the Law" would suggest that the original is *bal-krie* rather than *bal-tfile*. You will say that the obvious thing to settle on, then, is Prayer Leader, which is accurate and neutral enough to come out not *entirely* Quakerish or Christian Scientist. But it is too bland, I think, just *because* of its neutrality, so I have taken the risk and stayed with "Reader of the Law." It is, as "translation," wrong, but in English it is more right than any other alternative. Or so it seems to me now.

To someone not familiar with synagogue practice and personnel, "Reader of the Law" is altogether in context and holds the poem together. And this would also be true of one familiar with the synagogue, even though he might think *bal-krie*. If he *does* think that (though a reader of a poem should stick with the poem, and not try to translate back in his head), not an iota of violence is done to the poem anyhow.

(Einhorn's shade rises before me and says, "Well, as a matter of fact, I was going to say *bal-krie*, and it was only an accident I said *bal-tfile*.")

At this point in the struggle, you observe, I was at that second stage of errors, where I believed not that the poem is a law over the translator—that would mean "Prayer Leader"—but that the poem is a law over English, that what works in English will have to do, no matter what. I was unsympathetic to the poet and quite willing, as you saw, to call up the poet's ghost in order to get his approval for a workable English, even if it made him recast the poem. When I wrote to the editor that "not an iota of violence was done to the poem," I was clearly a believer in doing violence.

That was August. In September the editor answered as follows:

I agree that Prayer Leader is no good.

So what had I accomplished? I had wheedled him out of one mistake into a new mistake, this one of my own coinage.

By the next month we were skirting *bal-tfile*, letting it lie fallow, and were now embrangled in the word "dolor."

I had rendered a stanza this way:

And soundless on the steps of the Ark
the abandoned Shekhina rests,
her head bowed down in dolor,
black as night her dress.

The editor wanted "Jewish Spirit" instead of "Shekhina"; he wanted "grief" instead of "dolor."

I answered:

As for "Jewish Spirit," isn't the Shekhina here a concrete figure, like Heine's occasional Virgin? Jews *will* have their Astarte, no matter what. To keep faith with the ballad-feel of the poem, I've indulged in an old ballad-word, dolor.

Apparently I managed to wheedle out Shekhina, but not dolor, because my next letter is still at work:

I guess I did choose "dolor" for its archaic feel, so you mustn't object that it's archaic; I meant to reinforce the ballad-quality. But if you prefer another word, I can part with "dolor" without too much dolor. What would you think, though, of "sorrow" instead of "grief"? Like "dolor," "sorrow" carries out all those open vowels of the rest of the line: "head," "bowed," "down," whereas "grief" bites the line off rather too quickly, almost as though the stanza were ready to end too soon. Do let your own preference carry, however.

So he let me keep "sorrow."

Very soon afterward, though, we were back at *bal-tfile*. Now I was writing hopelessly,

So what's to be done? Capitulate on literalness, and remove the poem from poetry to data? One last-ditch idea, which I throw down on the page in desperation: how about a still more reckless literalness? How about a *direct* translation of the Hebrew, how about this: "Master of Prayer." At least it sounds ancient, at least it doesn't sound Protestant. It has rather a Buberian dignity, a bit of authority, a drop of majesty: "The last Master of Prayer is dead." It comes out poetry. But what I put under the head of dignity, authority, and majesty (not that the *bal-tfile* is all that, but the Jewish Idea is, and the poem is about the Jewish Idea)—what I put under that head, you may pronounce pretentious.

Well, if it has to be Prayer Leader, it has to be Prayer Leader.

Nearly a year later—but I have no documents to show how this came about—I had abandoned the ordeal of the imprecise precision, I had abandoned my trust in English as capable of offering a solution of workable equivalence, and the opening stanza read as follows:

The last to sing before the Ark is dead.
Padlocks hang in the house of the Jews.
The windows are boarded, and shadows
huddle in shame in the pews.

"Pews" seems to me now very bad. But what of "The last to sing before the Ark is dead"? Will that do for *Geshtorbn der letster bal-tfile?* Has the Pre-Existent Poem been uncovered? If seventy translators went into seventy separate rooms, would they all come out with this stanza, word-for-word as I've given it? Or would they all come out with Prayer Leader?

What I did not understand then was that I was not wheedling the editor, but educating myself; that I was not exhorting the editor, but beginning to perceive dimly the terrible complexities of the craft of translation. My ordeal with *Geshtorbn der letster bal-tfile* reveals the problem

of Yiddish translation at its most elementary and primitive stages; it is an account of a beginner's ordeal. For a long time I did not understand that a translator, though he may continue to cower before the idea of translation, must nevertheless not be afraid of the poem that lies before him; that he must think of himself as equal master of the poem together with the poet. I did not sympathize with Einhorn because I did not yet know that I was obliged to become Einhorn. I did not have authority over the poem because I did not believe that it was already there; I thought I had to jerry-build it myself, in various makeshift ways. I did not yet see that the poem had a blueprint of its own, a meticulous blueprint as original as a fingerprint; and that what I had to do was not look for the ink to reproduce the print, but to look for the inexorable lines of the print itself.

By the time I came to Leivick, by the time I came to Grade, I knew what to look for, I was a believer in the Pre-Existent Poem, I became Leivick, I became Grade; with a poem called *Tate-legende* I was surely Leivick, and one of my letters to the editor records how that extraordinary realization opened itself out:

> Meanwhile, as you suggested, I've gone ahead with *Tate-legende.* An extremely affecting poem, clear-eyed, sinuous, unsentimental. I worked on it with a kind of calculating joy—I have about sixteen pages of crowded work-sheets, filled with calculated alternatives: I guess I keep saying "calculate" because I took risks here and there to seize the tone. I am just now too much devoted to the poem to tell whether it all works; but you will tell me that. —One very, very still night, coming to the words *yingl du mayner, yingl du mayner, / ikh bin dayn tate der roiter,* I all at once felt Leivick's father's ghost enter me. Through the ribs and throat.

You can hear in that paragraph how the idea of "calculation" and "risk" flies suddenly away, replaced by becoming.

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#13

EDWARD L. GREENSTEIN

Theories of Modern Bible Translation

THE SUMERIANS saw it as a nasty prank by a trickster god.[1] The Israelites took it as the Creator's defense against the threat of human collaboration.[2] It has been derogated by some as a barrier to human fellowship and lauded by others as an instrument for widening our perceptions. One mind, many languages—the universality of the human faculty for language, the diversity of human speech. Those who want to know what the other fellow is saying must learn his language or get a translation. The vast majority of those who want to hear what the biblical God is saying take the latter alternative. The Bible, or portions thereof, has been rendered into nearly two thousand languages, and in English alone Bible translation proliferates in hundreds of versions. To some degree this trend may correlate with a growing impatience to learn a foreign language, especially a classical one. But far more important seems the effort to capture a greater measure of truth. Different translations bring various funds of knowledge and insight to bear on the interpretation of the Bible, its meaning. Each may offer a different slice of the truth. As everyone knows, each version of translation means something different. Not only different understandings of the text, but different methods of translating change the face of Scripture.

In the early 1960s Harry Orlinsky, the chief editor of the Jewish Publication Society's new rendering of the Torah (the New Jewish Version or NJV), wrote of a new "rage to translate—really to retranslate—the Bible."[3] As it happened in the Romantic period, when a surge in translating (the classics especially) was accompanied by considerable attention to the art and nature of translation as an enterprise,[4] the recent wave of Bible translation has been joined by its proper companion

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